

**Remarks of Commissioner Kathleen Q. Abernathy
Cable Television Public Affairs Association Forum**

April 1, 2003

(As prepared for delivery)

Thank you for inviting me here to speak with you today. It is a privilege to address the cable industry's public affairs representatives. You play a valuable role not only to your companies, but to your communities as well. You educate, you inform, and you challenge. You represent the heartbeat of the community to the companies you work for and that connection is indispensable to an industry whose customers *are* the community.

So, I want to commend you for your commitment to public affairs programming, especially during these challenging times. Cable's news and information services have brought the current conflict in Iraq to millions of Americans. Although the war is occurring overseas, it affects each and every one of us in our homes and in our hearts. Our thoughts and prayers are with the soldiers in Iraq and also the journalists, who may be putting their lives in danger to keep us informed.

But separate and apart from this most immediate media response to the war in the Iraq, many of us look to cable on a daily basis to be a leader in public affairs. And as you know the FCC solicits your input on various proceedings as we strive to improve the regulatory landscape. Not surprisingly, education plays a key role in what you do, and what the FCC does. For example, when we adopt new rules, we need to let consumers know how these rules affect them, as well as communicating with the companies that are more directly implicated. We regulate in the public interest, yet we sometimes forget to keep the public informed.

With that in mind, I wanted to talk to you today about two areas in which the cable community can play a key role in advancing public policy objectives that will benefit your local community and the industry alike. The first is giving families the tools, information and education they need to ensure that their children are watching programming that is age appropriate. The second is educating consumers about the value of digital technology and how the digital transition will affect them personally.

Family Program Viewing

There is no doubt that parents and children can benefit greatly from the many new services and options cable has brought into the television household. With the proliferation of channels and choices, there has been an increase in family friendly and children's programming options, such as Nickelodeon, the Discovery Channels, National Geographic, ABC Family, and others. But an increase in choices also means that there is an increase in programming that is not appropriate for families and children. This means that cable operators and programmers have a responsibility to give parents the tools they need to ensure that their children are not exposed to material that they think is unsuitable for them and to help parents and children understand the messages they receive. Not

unlike computers, cable can open up unforeseen educational and entertainment opportunities, but it can also deliver unwanted or objectionable content.

According to some reports, children in the US spend an average of four hours a day watching television – that is, nearly 18,000 hours by the time they graduate from high school. In comparison, they spend only 13,000 hours in school from kindergarten through 12th grade. Thus, I think it is clear that television has great potential to influence our children in both positive and negative ways. Because of this, all of you must work with parents to help them direct and supervise their children's television viewing. For example, the cable industry can inform parents about the choices of available programming, how to block programming they don't want their children viewing, and ways to educate their children about how to critically examine the messages they receive.

Parents need to be aware of the available children's programming and family friendly programming. Just recently, I talked with broadcasters about how to better promote their children's educational and informational programming with parents. Some ideas that we discussed were advertisements during television programs that attract parents, information on their websites, and clearer identification and labeling of children's educational and informational programming. The cable industry offers an even wider choice of children's programming and family-oriented fare. Virtually 24 hours a day, you offer alternatives to the adult shows that concerns parents, policy makers and children's advocates. And that is why I appeal to you to do even more to make your communities aware of the educational and family friendly programming that is available.

It is important to let parents know what channels and programs are safe for their families to tune into. And when parents are unable to directly supervise their children's viewing, the ratings system, the V-chip and other blocking technology provide an alternative means to address concerns about the effect of certain programming on children. Unfortunately, many Americans don't know how to use the V-chip, are not aware of its benefits, and don't understand the ratings systems. Research performed by Kaiser Family Foundation and the Annenberg Public Policy Center indicate that of all the families in a study who knew that they had a V-chip in their television, only about 1/3 of them tried to use it. And another study showed that of all the parents that have a V-chip-equipped television, less than half were even aware of that fact.

Now why am I appealing to you? I don't want the government to make decisions about what programming should be available; I would rather empower parents to make their own personal decisions. And its safe to say we all have somewhat different ideas about what is or is not appropriate for our children. It is important, therefore, to connect with your communities, tell them about the tools they have available, and explain what the ratings systems mean. And such information need not be limited to the V-chip alone. I have been impressed by the easy-to-use parental control functions that I have see in digital set-top boxes. Advances in technology have provided an accessible way for parents to guide the viewing habits of their children. This is a great benefit and one which should continue to be promoted to families.

I also realize, however, that a blocking tool may not be the appropriate vehicle for every family and it may not be enough. Parents can also use assistance in determining what is appropriate for their children to watch and then helping their children comprehend what they do see. The cable industry has been a leader in recognizing the need for families to understand, analyze and evaluate media messages through your media literacy initiatives. I want to commend these efforts and express my hope that they will continue and be expanded. Educating parents and children about how to critically evaluate and interpret the messages they receive is an important tool to help families navigate the vast amount of information and entertainment that is vying for their children's attention. As this industry has recognized, [media can be an excellent teacher. But without the knowledge of how to interpret messages, children may be exposed to content that is confusing or inappropriate. Media literacy can help families make informed judgments and decisions about media use.](#)

And as all of you know, the lessons that your industry can share need not be confined solely to what is aired on television. You also can use the persuasive effect that your characters, themes, and stories have on children in positive ways that go beyond their experiences in front of the set. Learning Together – a program developed by the ABC Cable Networks group – provides a good example. Learning Together encourages family involvement in reading, creativity and learning. Each of the participating cable channels target different age groups based on the audience for the shows on the network. They reach out to families through mentoring of middle school aged girls, encouraging parents to read with their young children, and helping parents and teens communicate about important social issues, just to name a few. This is but one example and I am sure there are more because the cable industry is very creative and there should be no boundaries or limits to what you can offer to your community.

I also recognize that the FCC must not leave it all up to you. We have a significant role to play as well. As part of my focus on the value of media education, I would like to tell you about an initiative I am launching at the FCC. With the help of the Consumer and Government Affairs Bureau, we are setting up a “Parent’s Page” on the FCC’s website. This page will include information explaining to parents the tools that are available to guide their children’s viewing. It will explain the broadcaster’s children’s educational and informational programming requirements and provide links to stations that are willing to make their E/I programming schedule available. It will explain how the V-chip works, other blocking options, what the ratings system is, what our indecency rules prohibit, and how to file an indecency complaint. While I have put out consumer newsletters covering many of these issues, I believe that having this information together on a single page that is focused on parents will improve our ability to provide useful information to the public. As I have stated before, education is essential to our ability to regulate in the public interest. Only with knowledge, can parents make informed decisions. I look forward to working with CGB, the industry, and the public to make this site a useful tool for parents in directing their families’ television viewing.

Digital Transition

I would like to switch gears now for a few moments, and discuss the pivotal role that the cable public affairs community can play in educating consumers about the digital transition. We now stand at the precipice of one of the most fundamental changes in television since the introduction of color television nearly fifty years ago. Digital television will provide improved sound and picture quality, even more programming options for consumers, and free up valuable spectrum for wireless and public safety uses.

All segments of the industry – cable, broadcast, and consumer electronics – are making significant investments in our digital future. Yet, no one is likely to reap the benefits of this investment unless we get consumers interested, knowledgeable and engaged. As Robert has previously noted, consumer education is critical to the success of this transition. That is why I was pleased that last May, the largest cable operators committed to advertise and market HDTV and other DTV programming. But there is much more work to be done.

In its report to Congress last November, the GAO found that one of the reasons consumer adoption of digital television has been slow is because many Americans are both unaware of the transition and uneducated about DTV products. In a telephone survey of randomly selected households, the GAO found that 40% of the respondents never heard about the transition, and less than one in five were “very aware” of it. Nearly half of the respondents were not familiar at all with the difference between an analog television set and a digital high definition television set. In addition, GAO found that sales staff at the retail level sometimes provided inaccurate or incomplete information about DTV equipment and programming. And I know Robert recently told a story about cable technicians going to install HD set-top boxes and discovering that as many as half of those consumers that ordered the service didn’t have an HD-ready set. Apparently, consumers are confusing large screen and flat screen TVs with HDTVs.

So, we all need to do a better job educating viewers. First, consumers need to understand how the digital transition affects them. For example, I have spoken with people on various occasions who seem very concerned that their television will simply stop working on December 31, 2006. To help combat this dearth of information, I recently put out a consumer newsletter on “What to Consider When Purchasing a Television for The Digital Age.” This newsletter explains what digital television is, what is available now, and when the transition will end. It also helps guide consumers in the choices they will have to make by explaining the different equipment that is available and the type of services they can expect from each. When consumers do make the investment, we want to be sure that they have enough information to know what questions to ask and how to make smart choices.

In addition to educating consumers about how the transition will affect them, we also need to explain why this a good thing. We need to show people the benefits that digital television has to offer and give them a reason to invest in the digital future. Only through knowledge and experience will consumers be willing to make this investment.

Thankfully, cable companies are stepping up and carrying digital signals, and cable programmers are providing HDTV services as well. I think all of us recognize that if few consumers purchase sets, no one will receive a return on their investment. So it is just plain good business to educate consumers about the benefits of HDTV.

I want to thank you again for inviting me here today and I look forward to working with the cable industry and all of you to continue to improve viewing options for children and reach out to consumers to transition us all into the digital age.